

## Hunter's Point Development Revealed

By Ben Hogwood  
June 5, 2008

Speakers at a public hearing on the Hunters Point South proposed development were unanimously impressed by the 30-acre project.

And what's not to like? The City – which is on the verge of purchasing the property – has revealed a design that includes 11 acres of waterfront parkland, a mix of residential and retail space, an assortment of building designs, a school, and wide-open views of Manhattan's skyline.

The problem, said almost every person who spoke, is that there is no way the average Queens resident could afford to live there.

Community Board 2 held the public hearing on June 28 at 2 Court Square in Long Island City. One person after another – often speaking through a translator – said the development needed to include housing for lower income families.

However, low-income housing is not the City's goal with this project.

The City is working to purchase 24 acres of the property, located along the East River, from the Port Authority for \$100 million and develop it with the goal of providing housing for middle income families. The remaining six acres of the development is owned by a subsidiary of the Empire State Corporation, a state entity.

According to the City Department of Housing Preservation and Development, the City is experiencing a loss of middle income neighborhoods due to ever-soaring real estate prices. While the federal government has an abundance of programs aimed at developing low-income housing, there are no programs to help the middle tier, said Ruth Ann Visnauskas, a spokesperson for the department.

The City's plan is to reserve 60 percent of the 5,000 units for families in that middle income bracket, people such as teachers, firefighters and nurses. For a family of four, the annual income to qualify for the housing would be between \$55,000 and \$158,000. The remaining units would go at market value.

"We are trying to reach a large spectrum of individuals and households," said Visnauskas.

But for many in the audience, which numbered almost 100, the spectrum wasn't nearly wide enough. They believed the project neglected the average Queens resident and the people that most need help.

"My reason for being here is because I want to touch the hearts of the people doing this project, because maybe they forgot there are a lot of poor people in the neighborhood, and also people with disabilities," said Alizia Vizueta, the first to voice her comment.

Others followed suit.

"I think all New Yorkers are equal," said Forzana Marshed. "Everyone has the right to live like a good citizen."

"In this area ... one-fifth of the population is making \$17,000 a year," added Hannah Weinstock, a community organizer with Queens Community House. The organization is part of an affordable housing coalition rallying against the current proposal. Also, she said the median family income in Queens is \$48,000 and the median family income in the Long Island City/Woodside/Sunnyside area is \$44,000.

"Public land should be for the public, not just one section of the public," she said, and asked the Community Board 2 to vote against the project when it has that opportunity.

Weinstock, as well as most speakers, asked that 20 percent of the units be reserved for families making \$25,000 or less, 30 percent for families making between \$25,000 and \$48,000 and the other 50 percent could be split between middle income wage earners and market value.

"It's really disgusting that families making over \$100,000 qualify for affordable housing," she said in a later interview.

John Furlong with Habitat for Humanity added that while working class neighborhoods may be disappearing, the City is also seeing a disappearance of low-income neighborhoods. He said he recently saw a family of five living in two rooms.

"A child was sleeping in the kitchen," he said.

The City is considering setting up a nonprofit entity that would oversee the development and management of the residential buildings. It would also allow it to receive tax exemptions, lowering construction costs. Typically the City would purchase the property, then put out a request for proposals from developers to build on the land.

But according to Elena Conte, an organizer with the Pratt Center for Community Development, setting up the nonprofit would also allow the City to circumvent federal laws requiring 20 percent of the units be reserved for low-income families.

Joe Conley, chairman of Community Board 2, encouraged speakers to continue to raise their concerns at each step of the development's public hearing stage. The project will next go to the Community Board, which will vote for or against the proposal. It would then move on to the Borough President's Office for review, then to the City Planning Commission, the City Council and finally the Mayor's Office.

"With your passion, you should show up and express your thoughts as we go through the process," Conley said.



Artistic Renderings of the proposed Hunter's Point south development.